

Check against delivery

**RULING ON THE QUESTION OF PRIVILEGE
RAISED ON FEBRUARY 8, 2012,
BY THE MEMBER FOR AHUNTSIC
(MRS. MOURANI)
REGARDING MEMBERS BRINGING THEIR INFANT CHILDREN
INTO THE CHAMBER**

February 16, 2012

I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised on February 8, 2012, by the Member for Ahuntsic (Mrs. Mourani) regarding Members bringing their infant children into the Chamber.

I would like to thank the Member for having raised this matter, as well as the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Mr. Van Loan), the Chief Opposition Whip (Ms. Charlton), and the Member for Saanich–Gulf Islands (Ms. May) for their interventions.

This question of privilege arose from events that occurred on February 7, 2012, when the Member for Verchères–Les Patriotes (Ms. Hassainia) brought her infant son into the Chamber immediately prior to the taking of a recorded division. At that time, several other Members began taking photographs of mother and son, creating a disturbance in the process.

The Member for Ahuntsic explained that it had been her impression, when she had a newborn that Members could not bring their babies into the Chamber during votes. She therefore requested that the Chair clarify whether there were any House rules or practices on the matter.

Let me begin by saying that it will come as no surprise to the House that I do not see this as a matter of privilege. As the Member for Ahuntsic herself has pointed out, the matter at hand really has to do with a need to clarify existing practices, and she has requested that I also review what steps can or should be taken to assist Members with infants or young children as they juggle the challenges and obligations associated with being a parent who is also a Member of the House of Commons.

The events of Tuesday, touching as they do on very personal matters for the Members concerned, are always difficult to adjudicate. As a Member with four children under the age of 7, I must confess that I am particularly sympathetic to the challenges faced by all elected officials who strive to find a balance between the demands of their work and the needs of their families.

While the events which unfolded on February 7 may seem to suggest that some of our rules and practices are rooted in traditions that no longer mesh seamlessly with modern realities, the truth is quite different. In fact, the House – and the Speakership on its behalf -- has a long history of adapting its

practices to meet the needs of the day. The Chair has been afforded considerable latitude to reconcile apparent contradictions between our rules and practices and contemporary values.

This is exactly what has happened over the years in relation to the kind of situation the House faced last Tuesday. As some Members have pointed out, there have been cases in the past where Members have brought very young babies into the Chamber, mainly for votes. In their wisdom, my predecessors in the Chair have handled these situations by turning a blind eye and, given that the presence of the babies did not create disturbances, allowing House business to proceed uninterrupted.

It is important to recall that in the case at hand several Members were flouting the rules by taking photographs in the Chamber, and it was this disturbance to which the Chair's attention was drawn. So let me take this opportunity to suggest to Members that it would be of great assistance if Members advised the Chair privately, in advance where they can, of a particular difficulty they are facing. I believe this would help us to avoid the kinds of disturbances that were witnessed last Tuesday, which in turn led to the events which have given rise to this ruling.

When considering what kind of guidelines should be followed on an ongoing basis, it struck me that there are few times when Members might actually be unable to make alternative arrangements. It is really only during unexpected votes that Members could face difficulties. Fortunately, most recorded divisions are scheduled far enough in advance that Members should be able to plan accordingly.

However, the Chair appreciates that plans sometimes fail. When that happens, Members may find themselves in a difficult position. In such cases, provided there is no other type of disruption or disturbance, the Speaker's attention will likely not be drawn to the situation and the work of the House can proceed as usual.

It would also be helpful to the Chair – and, I think, to the whole House – even after some incident has occurred involving the Chair, if Members approached me directly to discuss any concerns they may have.

I should remind Members that, more broadly, the House as an institution has a long history of improving facilities to assist Members as working parents. Not all Members realize that it is now almost 30 years ago that under the leadership of former Speaker Jeanne Sauvé the parliamentary childcare centre, *The Children on the Hill*, was established, providing Members and staff with young children access to workplace daycare. In addition, some time ago, the House installed change-tables in a number of washroom facilities in Centre Block and elsewhere. On this point, I have asked the Clerk to assess whether the number of change tables is sufficient to meet the needs of Members with infants and to verify that they are appropriately located for their use.

At the same time, the Chair is advised that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is embarking on a thorough review of the Standing Orders. Given the composition of the current House, as the Members who intervened on this matter have suggested, it may well be timely for the Committee, as part of this study, to review existing practices in this regard. The Chair would welcome the collective wisdom and guidance of the Standing Committee in this admittedly nebulous area.

In the meantime, the Chair will continue to be governed by the approach taken in the past by previous Speakers, always mindful of my obligation to preserve order and decorum so that the House may conduct its business without disruption, knowing that I can count on the cooperation of all Members in this regard.

I thank all Members for their attention on this matter.